

Permanent Collection work:

Brett Weston

Untitled (Forest in Fog), 1962

gelatin silver print

Helen Johnston Bequest, Focus Gallery Collection

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Essay written by student, Laura Jackson, Spring 2001

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Brett Weston

Brett Weston was a great modern photographer of the twentieth century who propelled photography in a new direction. Weston discovered his interest in photography at a young age, and pursued it with great pleasure and dedication into a long and successful career. His father, Edward Weston, was a renowned photographer who first earned recognition for his misty romantic studies that were popular during the early 1900s. When Weston was a teenager, Edward Weston began to bring his son along on his photography excursions. On their first trip together in Mexico, Edward allowed Brett to use his camera, and he immediately recognized his son's natural talent.

The two-month period in Mexico was the first emergence of Weston Sr.'s new definitive style that established him as both photographic pioneer and master, and it was also when Brett Weston's work was born. The elder Weston abandoned his old pictorial style for a style that used the camera directly to produce sharp, incisive images, emphasizing surface texture. This became characteristic of his later work, and Brett Weston worked along side his father, sharing this new direct eye for photography, and quickly absorbed his father's techniques for developing and printing.

Brett Weston's work began to attract international attention of its own when twenty of his prints were exhibited at the 1929 "Film and Foto" exhibition in Stuttgart, Germany when he was just eighteen years old. Weston became recognized as a successful modern photographer, and his work was being shown alongside that of the world's leading modern artists, architects, photographers, and avant-garde filmmakers. In 1932, Weston had his first major one-man show at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. He produced his first portfolio of ten photographs of San Francisco in 1935.

Weston also became associated with the group f/64 in the early 1930's. His father was a key figure in this group that promoted "straight" photography and rejected academic pictorialism. He assimilated his father's view that "straight-forward, discriminating use of the camera could yield all the art that photography could legitimately call its own."¹ Although Weston and his father were contemporaries who shared this modern formalist style, the younger Weston's work was very much his own. Weston's photography was simpler and extended in more abstract terms. He treated his material in a direct, truthful manner and made something that seemed insignificant or ordinary interesting through his strong eye for form and his emphasis on repeated shapes. This reflected his vision of an underlying abstract structure in all of nature.

Weston considered the printing process as important as taking the photograph. He was one of the great printers in the history of photography and was always uncomfortable about reproductions of his prints. Upholding a promise he made years earlier, Weston burned a numerous amount of his negatives when he turned eighty, so that they could not be printed by anyone other than himself.

¹ Baker, Kenneth. "Carmel, Calif.: Integrity or Censorship?," Art News 91, (n. 3 March 1992): 35.

In 1955, Weston returned to Carmel Highlands after his father's death, an area he had photographed often throughout his career. At this point, his photographic expeditions ranged mainly throughout the western part of the continent, from Alaska to Baja California, with some to New York, Texas, and White Sands, New Mexico. In 1960, he went abroad for the first time, traveling to destinations in Europe and the East, which he described as "a way to refresh the eye."²

Weston's *Forest* (1962) was taken later in his career and shows a wooded scene in the Carmel area of the California coast. Nature always played a significant role in the subject matter of Weston's photographs. He had spent some time in the California coast area and moved there several years earlier, and its naturally beautiful surroundings remained the subject of much of his later work. Although this image has not received attention in scholarly literature, it seems clear that Weston's *Forest* demonstrates his own vision through the camera. It is a very simple and direct shot through the trees that reveals his eye for abstract forms in nature as he captures the repeated shapes of dark trees silhouetted against the white, misty air.

This image also displays an influence from his travels to Europe in his work. Prior to his trips to Europe, starting in 1960, his images typically featured a highly abstract quality and harsher contrast between positive and negative forms. In this image, there is a fluid relationship between the forms and a greater sensitivity to the beauty of the landscape composition. This achieves greater unity of the image as a whole and makes the space of the composition more visually pleasing to the viewer.

Although Weston's work shifted toward abstraction, it never lost its unique quality. Throughout his career, Weston explored every realm of photography, and

² Cravens, R.H. Brett Weston: Photographs From Five Decades. (New York, 1980): 60

photographed every conceivable subject. While he went through successive stages of development, he always preserved his pure vision through the camera.

Baker, Kenneth. "Carmel, Calif.: Integrity or Censorship?" Art News 91, (n. 3 March 1992): 35-37.

This article discusses Weston's appreciation for the printing process of photography and the criticism he received when he burned numerous amounts of his negatives at eighty years old so that no one else could reproduce them.

Cravens, R.H. Brett Weston: Photographs From Five Decades, (New York, 1980)

This book offers a collection of Weston's work starting in the 1940s, and a biography following the development of his work and the influence of his father, Edward Weston.

Newhall, Beaumont. Brett Weston: Voyage of the Eye, (New York, 1975)

This book provides a collection of Weston's work displayed with various poems, including some earlier photographs from 1925 to the 1930s. An afterword by Newhall discusses his life as a photographer and his father.

Weston, Brett. Brett Weston: Master Photographer. (Carmel, California, 1989)

This book presents a number of Weston's photographs, divided into six periods of five to ten years and offers discussion about his life and work during each of these periods.